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2014

# Conditional Clauses

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*West Virginia University*

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Conditional Clauses

Meghan Olson

Thesis submitted  
to the College of Creative Arts  
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts in  
Printmaking

Committee:  
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Department of Art and Design

Morgantown, West Virginia  
2014  
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## **Abstract**

### *Conditional Clauses*

Meghan Olson

My MFA written thesis addresses work completed and shown in a thesis exhibition at West Virginia University as well as significant influences to my studio process. While my stated focus is printmaking, the work presented in the exhibition consisted of six sculptural and installation pieces. This thesis, along with the supporting exhibition, will address my investigations into probing ordinary materials for juxtapositions and arrangements that lend themselves towards a conditional, not absolute, meaning. The work is created from an impulse to put everyday materials together in order to observe subtle relationships that ultimately transcend the ordinary and question what is being seen or experienced.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express unfeigned gratitude for my committee, professors and cohort of graduate students. Without the guidance, patience and expectations of Joseph Lupo, Boomer Moore, Kristina Olson and Naijun Zhang, I would have gotten lost from trying to understand what is meant by conviction. Without the banter, company and continuing friendship with fellow graduate students and a number of professors, this experience would be robbed of lasting meaning. Instead and fortunately, this exploration will not end as abruptly as it began. Finally, without the fodder, shore, grit and tidal constancy of my husband and children, I would almost certainly be without direction, nearly devoid of anything much to feel, see, hear or say. For that meaning, I will be forever grateful.

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## Introduction

*Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.*

Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984) from *Art as Device*

In literature, prose and poetry are differentiated by the simple transformation of the ordinary into what feels like something much more. Poetry is ordinary language used to evoke notions of something else to create a reality of its own. That poetry uses words, spaces, breaks in sound and the page itself to balance conjunctions, linguistic connections and aural patterning is significant to me. Poetry's emphasis on the inconsequential extends an experience and allows for additional meaning to exist in otherwise ordinary linguistic sequences. What appears to be just an ordinary sequence of common words can have a magnification of meaning beyond just its literal significance due solely to its arrangement of parts. My work is focused on these same arrangements of the ordinary to play with similar concepts; specifically visual balance, connection, disconnection and the viewer's relationship to the immaterial. The challenge is to visually create something that metaphorically starts off in the world of prose but can be understood in the world of poetry. An example of this prose/poetry conundrum in literature can be found in the following short sentence by Gertrude Stein (1874-1946):

Five words in a line.

The above sentence isn't necessarily poetic in its structure. The resulting rhythm is in the world of prose or everyday conversational speech; parts economical and devoid of extraneous detail. However, slight manipulation and usage of meaning and grammatical form, as well as an exceptional use of interdependency between each word, make it more than just five linguistic units reading from left to right. It means both what it is, and more. Its particularity of ordinariness and arrangement magnifies the meaning and significance.

In this sense I hope my work can be viewed as a series of very ordinary, yet dependent, events that seem to be more than the sum of parts; a probing of ordinary materials for juxtapositions and arrangements that lend themselves towards a conditional, not absolute, meaning. Stemming from an

impulse to put everyday materials together in order to observe subtle relationships that question what is being seen or experienced, I am interested in the formal relationships and connections between materials, spaces, colors, and forms. When looked at as a whole, these seemingly disparate elements transform from individual parts into a visual world of their own. When complete, the work enters the continually changing conversation regarding the sublime in art in making sense or finding meaning in an unfamiliar or slightly tentative scenario. It also relates to contemporary installation and experience-based work, in particular to movements and artists who use commonplace or unexceptional materials and arrangements to highlight magnified meanings surrounding the objects or experiences in question.

### **Not all Prose makes Sound Poetry**

A constant struggle in my own studio practice is the needed restraint of interference or involvement. I have come to realize that the more I interfere, the more an object suffers conceptually and aesthetically. Just as relevant is the conclusion that I don't feel a personal narrative, through the guise of substantial interference, would add much significance to what is usually already there. The dilemma for me is finding the right conditions to approach a concern, when to edit out extraneous overworking of material, and when to do only what is needed. I must accept that something may never happen. This process feels somewhat risky; to trust that by stepping back, observing and then slightly editing what I see, the materials and any number of processes will present themselves differently. While seemingly inconsequential, these tiny moments and stories of connection and disconnection, balance and instability, and cause and effect are parts of a complicated whole that suggest possibility and the seemingly magical transformation of one thing into something else.

## Influences

I have found the work of several movements and a number of artists to be significant to my own studio investigations. On one hand are those that make use of anti-illusionism through the immaterial (light and space among others) and materials that are highly unexceptional or often appear unfinished. The others are those that investigate through installation the use of curious, often simple arrangements of the familiar into contexts slightly tentative or unfamiliar. Significant to my understanding of this in the visual arts are the concerns of the sublime addressed in the paintings of the Hudson River School, the reinterpretation of the ordinary by the Arte Povera movement in the 1960s (and the revisiting of these themes by a number of contemporary artists such as Guillaume Leblon (b.1971) and the contemporary work of Giovanni Anselmo (b. 1934)), the semiotic and formal investigations in the Postminimal work of Richard Tuttle (b. 1941), the process-driven work of Richard Serra (b. 1939), and the influence of materials, contextual awareness and processes of contemporary artists such as Gedi Sibony (b. 1973) and Mitzi Pederson (b. 1976).

### More than a Sum of Parts: Both the Problem and the Solution

*To make something which looks like itself is the problem, the solution.*

Richard Tuttle

When discussing the sublime in the arts, context is of extreme importance. Edmund Burke defined it as terror through the juxtaposition of objects of terror and privation; seen, for instance, in the diminishing presence of a light-filled, calm shore by slowly fluctuating, impenetrable waters urged forward by a dark, turbulent and wild sky in Martin Johnson Heede's *Approaching Thunderstorm* (1859).<sup>1</sup> The Kantian sublime is not simply the recognition or presence of terror but the inability of our reason to understand or come to terms with a phenomenon – particularly with something that is not anthropocentric or created by man, such as with nature or the Romantic concept of wilderness (see fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> In a

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Morely, "The Contemporary Sublime" in *The Sublime: Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010), 16.



contemporary context, the sublime can mean the activation of imagination in order to understand a phenomenon that is not yet fully apprehended, whether this is blankness (interpreted as possibility as opposed to absence), or moments of transition within the technological realm.<sup>3</sup> However, in this sense, the sublime can include the attempt to understand that which is not yet fully comprehensible, it can include the process of searching for meaning.<sup>4</sup> In his essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, Jean-Francois Lyotard discusses a modern interpretation of the sublime as still “an expressive witness to the inexpressible” yet one which takes place in the now, the moment of perception, and how one experiences an artwork.<sup>5</sup> What takes the place of the pictorial or symbolic representation of terror and suspense is the contemporary concern of nothing happening.<sup>6</sup>

This historical transformation of the sublime creates less of an emphasis on allegory and allusion, beginning with the mid-nineteenth century Hudson River School landscape paintings, to the increased emphasis on the experience between object and viewer that is of central concern in contemporary art.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, this experience between object and viewer questions meaning by probing for doubt and challenging the conventions that traditionally offer cues to meaning, conclusion and finish.<sup>8</sup> It is this presence of both doubt and curiosity and subsequent prodding for meaning that I am particularly drawn towards, especially in absence of any overt narrative or allegory. Stemming from the detached otherness and physical relationship to the viewer as evidenced in many minimalist works, the work of Post-Minimalists reflected the significance of the process or material in use but allowed the works to allude to other experiences, such as language. In this sense, the importance of what was really there was magnified. Of particular interest to me is the formal poetry and prose of everyday material in the working language of Post-Minimalist artist Richard Tuttle.

In the work of Richard Tuttle, reality is not alluded to nor represented, rather it is generated. Through semiotic and formal investigations, Tuttle has stated that both language and natural processes dictate the direction of his work. The metaphorical and literal signification of language influences his forms as in *Beethoven Stop on way to Egypt* (1986) (fig. 2). In this work three visual pieces are arranged in a row. The formal qualities encourage a left to right “reading”, a visual progression of forms and colors that seem to reflect the passage of moments and time referred to in the title. Sweeping horizontal bands of material start off quietly in scale and color in the first piece, escalate in scale, curvature, and

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, “Blankness as a Signifier” *Critical Inquiry*, (Autumn, 1997): 162.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Fisher, “The Echos of Enchantment” in *The Sublime: Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010), 89.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” *Art Forum* (April, 1984): 36-43.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>7</sup> Wilton, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Raphael Rubenstein, “Provisional Painting” *Art in America* (May, 2009): 122-135.

color in the second piece and lead the viewer's eye to one stout, rigid horizontal band that rests squarely and conclusively on a seemingly stately support of two vertical bands. Overall the work is small in scale but reads as a full, vibrant and rhythmically complete sentence composed of visual diminuendos, crescendos and a hard-stop final bar line.

Dependency on and inclusion of surroundings also plays a large role in Tuttle's work, which is something I hope my work can achieve. The wall and spaces between forms are integrally connected to his wire drawings of the early 1970s. The wire's stored memory, unified surface and lightness of material are of central importance in his *48<sup>th</sup> Wire Piece* (1972)(fig. 3). In this piece, Tuttle bends and forms wire. The tension and movement in a simple stretch of wire is made apparent by its inability to remain flat and the work offers a visual play between the stored energy of the wire as it moves through space, incorporating both its flattened counterpart, a cast shadow on the wall, and the expansiveness of the wall itself. What happens between the material and the wall, moments of connection and detachment, the flat and static state of one compared to the tension and suspension of the other, eliminates any need for a frame or secondary surface. The inclusion of gravity and friction are an essential part of this piece.

Tuttle also creates work where the surroundings are contained (framed) but what happens on the surface is a microcosm of similar material dependency. The process of saturation and evaporation are important to his water-saturated notebook paintings such as *Old Man and His Garden* (1982)(fig. 4). Here pigment and moisture are allowed to react and transform the paper. Pools of watercolors eventually warp and bend the painting's surface. Richard Tuttle has said his work is "the door to something real – in the sense we want to see something art *creates*, not art, itself."<sup>9</sup>

Tuttle's most influential works to me however are *Rest* (1970) and *3<sup>rd</sup> Rope Piece* (1974)(figs. 5,6). In both works, Tuttle uses common and inconsequential materials such as wood studs and cotton rope. These materials could be discards from Tuttle's studio, but their surfaces do not give evidence of any significant history. The materials hold no sense of nostalgia or external narrative. In *Rest*, two small pieces of wood are stacked in a horizontal position. Gravity and friction holds the elements together. Light blue paint is applied just around the joined surfaces indicating the zone of alignment. In *Rope Piece*, a small length of cotton rope, about a half inch in diameter is nailed to the wall in a horizontal position. Where the nail is placed, to what degree it pierces through the rope, and the volume of the cotton material used are very carefully selected by Tuttle to create a rhythm and balance on the surface of the wall. The ends of the rope are slightly frayed, allowing a more subtle transition from material to wall. Most importantly, the rope is placed at eye level on the wall with no surrounding material. The field of

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<sup>9</sup> Madelyn Grynstejn, *The Art of Richard Tuttle* (San Francisco: D.A.P., 2005), 47.

view is not cluttered or disrupted. Evenly lit, the shadow cast by the rope becomes as strong as the cotton itself. Despite its extremely small size, usually only three inches, it can visually dominate a large expanse of wall. Yet despite the obviousness of the materials and often the process, Tuttle's work seems to describe something present that isn't normally seen, something I hope for my own work to describe. Much of this can be attributed to his careful selection and reduction of material to only the essential, as well as his attention to the installation of each displayed object.<sup>10</sup>

Although monumentally different in scale and material, the work of Richard Serra can relate to Tuttle's in regards to cueing the viewer to meaning beyond just the material. Both employ anti-illusionism, immaterial forces and incorporate materials that appear to be unexceptional in either make up or finish. However the work of Serra makes exceptional use of scale, process and arrangements of raw material to directly cue the viewer to be aware of relationships between themselves and the object. This is particularly influential to me in terms of spatial awareness.

While many of Serra's later works overtly command a space, his drawings and earlier wall prop pieces are significant in that space and material appear to be teetering between slippage and stability in a much more accessible manner. In his *Bent Pipe Roll* (1968) Serra has two equal lengths of untreated pipe, small enough to carry unaided, that are connected in the middle by a heavier and wider stretch of lead pipe (fig. 7). The ends of the smaller pipes are bent at 45 degree angles to meet and join the heavier conduit in a structure akin to an elbow with three linear components. One smaller pipe rests on the floor, outstretched into the space of the viewer. The end closest to the wall is connected to the wider pipe, which balances at a 90 degree angle against the wall. Pinned between the wall and the heavier pipe, the second smaller lead piece runs up the wall to the average height of a viewer. The entire piece is held in place by the weight and balancing of the three separate materials interacting with both the planes of the floor and the wall.

Although this piece is small in comparison to many of Serra's prop pieces of the late 1960s and 1970s, it is still heavy, relates directly to the scale of the viewer, and casts a very stately and static shadow unlike the shadows cast by the wire pieces of Tuttle. The material, arranged and presented out of its utilitarian context, allows for the process and surface of these works to become curious, slightly tentative, and somewhat unfamiliar. Whereas Tuttle might employ similar arrangements to explore a sense of emotive or linguistic balance, the scale and material used by Serra refers back to physical relationships involving the viewer – the relative weight of an iron pipe, the height of a drawing, or the movement of material by human hand.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 44.

## The Importance of Perception

*The problem is to understand these strange relationships which are woven between the parts of the landscape, or between it and me as an incarnate subject, and through which an object perceived can concentrate in itself a whole scene or become the image of a whole segment of life.*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Much of what draws me to a particular type of work is a conceptual balance of things familiar and unfamiliar combined with a surprising balance of materials or process. To understand an object or scenario which does not immediately make sense is a challenge. Giving myself time, whether it is significant thought or just observation, is a very important part of my studio process. While this is something slow and not necessarily deliberate, it is a conscious effort to be observant and aware of the properties of a given material, its placement in space, and my changing perception of it. These ideas were explored in the work of Arte Povera artists in the 1960s and 1970s but they have been further explored by a number of contemporary artists.<sup>11</sup> In this sense the work of Gedi Sibony and Mitzi Pederson are very influential to my approach in the studio.

Late in 2007, the New Museum opened their inaugural exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Curated by Richard Flood, Laura Hoptman, and Massimiliano Gioni, the exhibit featured the work of 30 artists that heralded the new building. Not seeing the exhibition first hand, my familiarity is relegated to the exhibition catalogue and the mixed reviews of the exhibition itself. The curators set as their agenda the “anti-masterpiece” of “things that are cobbled together, pushed and prodded into a state of suspended animation [that] feel[s] right.”<sup>12</sup> In Hoptman’s catalogue essay, she states that the work does not simulate, interact, situate or allow itself to be marketed or to become a

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<sup>11</sup> While the last Art Povera exhibition was held in 1989, numerous exhibitions touching upon the influence of the movement as well as reinterpretations have been produced. One such exhibition was the *Pour un Arte Pauvre: Inventaire du Monde et de l’Atelier* (Towards a Poor Art: Inventory of the World) held in 2012 at the Museum of Art in Nîmes, France. This exhibition featured the work of the contemporary artists Karla Black, Katinka Bock, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Thea Djordjadze, Gabriel Kurri, Guillaume Leblon, Gyan Panchal and Gedi Sibony. See Francois Cohen, *Pour un Art Pauvre*, (Nîmes: Carre d’Art, 2011), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Flood, Laura Hoptman, Massimiliano Gioni and Trevor Smith, *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2007).

matter of spectacle.<sup>13</sup> Works presented were scaled down to the realm of intimacy, neither heroic nor monumental, and addressed through common and largely unsophisticated materials an ambiguity of form with multiple meanings well suited to contemporary economic and social concerns.<sup>14</sup>

The work of Gedi Sibony, in *Unmonumental* and in his subsequent exhibitions both in the United States and abroad, addresses the inherently ambiguous and curious theme of doubt through material, space, and installation. Somewhat like Richard Tuttle, Sibony's materials are spare and commonplace. Using a wide range of discarded items he collects and observes for some time, he has stated that he trusts that something is happening particularly when he looks the other way. In *It Can Happen Because of Everything Else* (2007), Sibony has taken a swath of cloth that had at one time covered a large shelving unit in his studio and recreated this same form in the hall of a gallery (fig. 8). At first glance, this piece may be seen as reminiscent of the wrappings of Christo. While Christo's work is about a volume being draped, tied, wrapped or taped, Sibony's piece alludes more to the contextual circumstances and processes that allowed the form to be created in the first place. Gravity molds the fabric to form over a volume, and the darkness of the storage room at once obscures and reveals the surfaces of both the shelving unit and the fabric itself.

Through its simplicity and economy, the work also addresses, among other things, the intricacies and often indistinguishing characteristics of cause and effect as in *I Stay Joined* (1991/2007) (fig. 9). In Sibony's work, materials and spaces are allowed to interact and he is left to observe and make only minimal adjustments or interferences to transport a work from the space of creation or observation (his studio) to the dislocated, isolated, neutral environment of the gallery. Drawing from a minimalist and post-minimalist history, Sibony's work juxtaposes the everyday with both the viewer and the space in which they are viewed. Like the assemblages of Tuttle, Sibony's work presents the effect of combinations of materials and forces.

Similarly, Mitzi Pederson's work makes use of context and interdependency particularly in terms of scale, light and weight of materials in order to create a seemingly delicate architecture composed of ordinary materials. Whereas Sibony's work is usually comprised of singular pieces, Pederson's work often involves a multiplicity. The constant use of a multiple in a number of scenarios, as well as her juxtaposition of common but unlikely materials, such as concrete and glitter, have helped me think through a number of magnification problems when in the studio, particularly when working with a series of materials that are often lightweight and somewhat unfinished in nature such as wood studs and fabric.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Her work with every-day and industrial materials such as cinderblock, glitter, bass wood strips, and tulle, creates rhythmical juxtapositions of materials and forms. This draws attention to the relationships between broken, tugging, stretched or suspended surfaces as in *Untitled* (2008) (fig. 10). The use of repetition in her work allows it to both react and respond to its context or installation while also serving to further define itself as a system of its own as with the cinderblock configurations in *Untitled* (2011) (fig. 11). Pederson's use of the multiple is also intriguing to me due to its relation to visual conventions of telling stories and indicating both a beginning and an end. This has prompted me to heavily consider the point in a process or work when a multiple is needed and when it has become extraneous.

## **Conditional Clauses**

This exhibition continues my investigations into probing ordinary materials for arrangements that lend themselves towards a conditional, not absolute, meaning. The work is created from an impulse to put everyday materials together in order to observe subtle relationships that ultimately transcend the ordinary and question what is being seen or experienced.

*Conditional Clauses* consisted of several sculptural arrangements that made use of ordinary materials such as lumber, cardboard, reflective tape, wire, clamps and paper – materials akin to adjectives and conjunctions - commonplace but often valued for their use with other materials. These works were installed in the Laura Mesaros Gallery in reaction to the architectural characteristics of the space. Work needed to be installed in direct relation to such conditions as the gallery's daylight facing glass wall, natural flooring, warmer interior walls, lengthy floor plan, lofty ceilings and three pockets of awkward exhibition areas – a carpeted mezzanine type entryway, a tidal-pool-like floor space bound on one side by a curving ramp, and a corner island-like space cut off by a handrail. As it relates to contemporary installation-based work, the exhibition was a combination of free standing sculptural pieces as well as wall-mounted or leaning pieces intended to be closely approached or almost stumbled upon. The work was intended to avoid personal narratives or directives and as such requested an audience willing to spend a moment in the experience of looking. The exhibition made use of the properties of the materials presented and the manipulation of lighting in the space.

### **The Exhibition**

Conditional clauses are if/then statements that often follow a curious logic and lead to figmental meanings. Not surprisingly, they are one of the more difficult forms of grammar to interpret. While the rules of grammar are normally absolute, in conditional clauses there are many rules of exception. Conditional clauses are statements that combine past, present, future and provisional tenses to indicate potential circumstances, either realistic but imaginary or sometimes impossible and entirely tangential. They work through the careful selection and arrangements of grammatical form. If/then statements are created by the compatibility between interdependent articles and their collective meaning that

acknowledges contingencies. In analogy, the work in this exhibit explores the pairing of inconsequential materials with unexceptional arrangements – bringing attention to conditional, not absolute, moments where things might meet, become disconnected or form simple, balanced if/then statements. Like the curiously bending rules of grammar to allow for meaning to be made, the work in this exhibit also seeks to make use of the rules of the gallery space to create different senses or impressions in each work. These situations attempt to balance the sometimes imperceptible connections between straightforward materials, arrangements and processes and the potential for resulting situations that are both surprising and consequential.

Upon walking into the Laura Mesaros Gallery, the viewer entered a space where the light was manipulated to appear less focused and somewhat ambient (fig. 12). The lighting in this room was staged to allow both the viewer to be cued to work that is easy to overlook, and to signify a need to slow down and observe the material matter and the immaterial consequences throughout the exhibit. While one warm bulb was used to directly light text on the left side of the room, the remaining light was cooled by a combination of LED spotlights and fluorescent cove lighting. This is in contrast to the very warm, very hot lighting often used in galleries to spotlight work. High Kelvin fluorescent lighting was installed to cast a cooler, mid-day colored light that would bounce around a portion of the room and indirectly light the work. Since one of the bulbs was in closer proximity to a wall and corner while the other was closer to a ledge, different color correcting gels were applied to each bulb to help with the intensity and specific temperature of the lighting.

In this same space, to the right and leaning against the wall, were three wooden planks of various common widths (four, twelve and ten inches respectively) at similar heights. The top of each wooden plank was spray-painted neon pink or lime green. Each piece was propped against the wall so that the tops of each piece were horizontally in unison. Due to the irregularity in length of each board, this alignment forced the bottoms of each plank to kick out at various distances from the wall. The painted tops of each piece reflected on the surface of the wall and the distance between the individual boards was just enough that the reflected colors did not overlap or separate on the wall (fig. 13). An alternating pattern of complimentary colors formed a short, continuous immaterial line on the wall. Alternating spaces of material, floor and shadow formed incomplete triangular volumes between the wall, floor, and boards. Each board, while at an average length of about five feet, just short of average human height, rest against the wall just below eye level at about four and a half feet. The angle of the lean was just enough to somewhat obscure the painted surfaces, but not enough to make them invisible.

This piece in particular made surprising use of gallery rules and expectations (the typical height of displayed work, use of traditional materials, the referencing of movements or color theory) but came about accidentally. This process of discovery and unintended consequences, however, is an important



part of the exhibition as a whole. Other examples of experimenting with gallery rules can be seen in the deliberate manipulation and addition of lighting sources and the decision to not include labels or statements anywhere near the work in hopes of recreating this same sense of ambiguity, curiosity and reveal for the visitor. I had been purchasing wood from the cull pile at a national lumber outlet for support on another project. Culled lumber is unsalable standard stock due to warping, surface damage or splitting. While still somewhat usable, each stock length deemed for cull is cut to a predetermined and approximate length of five feet (just short of any standard useful length) making each piece even more unusable. The boards have a dot of spray paint applied to the top to indicate cull stock status and their subsequent retail value of almost nothing.

These pieces sat in the studio for a while and I would move them frequently while rearranging the workspace. Propped against the wall, just enough to be vertically stable, I noticed how the paint made such a strong reflection on the wall but due to the angle of the lean, the source of this color wasn't immediately visible. Cohesively, the independent roles of light, gravity, friction, hue and surface worked together to create a curious, yet simple, transformation of a situation entirely dependent on its parts. Using these simple factors, I played with the arrangements of the colors and spaces between each piece to find a pattern or grouping that fit best within a particular scenario.

From the entry way down the curved ramp into the gallery, the viewer passes a sculptural piece isolated to the right, in the gallery's corner. Cut off from the rest of a long, rectangular room by way of the ramp's handrail and the resulting raised triangular platform or island of flooring, this is the most inaccessible space in the gallery. Balanced in this space, stood a sculpture made from a bent and torqued piece of wood (eight feet tall by one inch wide), an unusually long navy-blue and engine-red striped scarf, and two c-clamps, one rusted and nearly a foot in length and another powder coated black and only four inches long (fig. 14). The smaller of the clamps secured the scarf to the top end of the bowing wood. The scarf was pulled straight and taut to the ground where it was secured by the larger clamp to the bottom of the wood. It wrapped underneath the wood and trailed in a straight line about two feet behind the wooden length which bowed back in a slight arch toward the tail of the scarf and the remainder of the gallery. Held in balance, the structure stood on its own due to the simple connections between all of its constituents. The supporting, foot-like clamp on the ground served as a unifier for the wood, scarf and floor, while also connecting and counterbalancing in the smaller weight above created by the hand-sized clamp and connecting line of fabric.

Different and more complicated in character than the accompanying work in the exhibition, this piece was slightly figurative and narrative due to its scale, materials and colors. Its form was less tentative in appearance than others since its reliance upon immaterial forces (gravity and tension) wasn't indicated by space, light or reflection but rather by the scarf material and parallel markings on the surface

of the cotton and the found wood. It was possibly the most dependent on its isolated situation due to the precarious and fragile nature of its balance. Subsequently, it was congruent in its function and ability with the other works to form a statement analogous to a grammatically correct if/then clause.

Stretching along the west wall of the gallery just beyond the end of the ramp, was a long triptych consisting of three large sheets of white paper, each 55 inches in width and 80 inches in length (fig. 15). Altogether extending nearly fourteen feet into the gallery space along the wall, this piece slightly referenced a landscape painting due to its overall horizontal format and subtle shift of planes on the surface of the paper. Each piece was a sheet of heavy-weight hot-pressed paper with four horizontal, sculptural relief lines running across each panel just above the middle. These lines were formed by applying water to the paper and allowing the paper to fully saturate, buckle, and then dry. The shadows formed from raised lines and buckling surface created tonal shifts on the large expanses of otherwise flat white paper. The tops of each sheet were attached to a framing support between it and the wall while the bottoms of each panel hung freely with a slight upward bounce, created from the material's muscle memory due to storage on a roll. The horizontal lines and slight upwards curved at the bottom of each piece mimic the expanse of the room and the intersection of horizontal and vertical planes where wall met floor.

A triptych was chosen to utilize a height to width aspect ratio used in landscape photography, painting and cinema. Given a large sense of scale, a simple phenomenon like water soaking into paper, can have dynamic visual effect. This phenomenon draws attention to small, yet significant, changes to the surface that can transform one's visual sense of depth and prompt one to make sense of something that may not actually exist, such as a horizon line. These pieces play with the idea of creating the appearance of space with light on an inherently flat surface.

Furthest back in the gallery, three boards of thin yet wide cedar, nearly twenty-one feet in length each, leaned against the wall staggered at various distances from each other and the wall itself (fig. 16). Each piece was irregular in width (they were tapered and grooved planks of wooden siding) and variations such as splits, notches and sections of weakness due to rot were apparent. These variations as well as the stress due to the length of each propped piece resting on relatively little surface area, caused each board to twist slightly in order to maintain balance and remain wedged between the floor and the wall. Making use of the lofty, twenty-foot ceilings in the gallery, as well as the slightly angled trajectory of the rear third of the gallery, the simple planks were given enough space to exist independently of other works with little visual interruption or forced boundaries.

The dirt and soot already existing on the planks created a tonal shift from bottom to top of each plank. When propped upright, this made visual sense as the pieces receded in distance. During transportation, three staples and a number of pen marks were added to the board. These were removed and in these particular areas, charcoal was applied to blend in these altered areas with the remainder of the plank. The charcoal in certain areas was a bit too dark so a small amount of graphite was added to the edges to reflect, just slightly, light and visually bring the surface forward. Special attention to lighting in this area of the gallery required the installation of full spectrum florescent light hidden within the ceiling to bounce around a cooler light that indirectly lit the boards. The intent was to create less of a spotlight on the piece, reduce dramatic shadows or color shifts, and give the piece an increased sense of height lost from a close, dark ceiling (fig. 17). The interest in this piece was driven by revisiting the material and spatial considerations of the Arte Povera movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and similarly revisited interests in the recent work of Giovanni Anselmo, and Guillaume Leblon (figs, 18,19).<sup>15</sup>

A large space was left open along the east wall of the gallery to allow a more natural division between the large cedar planks and three small wall pieces installed towards the front. Installed at standard eye level were three intimately-scaled pieces constructed from cardboard box sides, low gauge wire, and vinyl tape applied to the backs of the cardboard (fig. 20). Each cardboard panel balanced and floated from the wall due to the use of the wire as a hanging mechanism. Light was able to bounce around behind each piece casting shadows on the wall the color of the obscured vinyl tapes on the backs of the cardboard. Due to the floating distance from the wall, the shadows of each piece were cast in several different directions, often overlapping and creating areas of color concentration and mixing. The multiple shadows yielded to a sense of volume created by the cardboard, hanging wires and the wall itself. More than any other work in the gallery, these pieces invited close physical inspection while also obscuring a large portion of material. The distance between the wall and cardboard was set just far enough to peer behind but not enough to see the totality of what was happening behind each piece. These pieces relied heavily on disparate surfaces and slight, fragile connections to create a visual balance between the material and immaterial, articulation and disconnection, and density and exposure.

The last piece in the exhibition was a floor piece that sat between the front end of the east wall and the bottom of the ramp wall. Placed directly on the floor was a soft pink, sculptural piece six feet in diameter (fig. 21). Composed entirely of overlapping ten-inch circles of baby pink tulle, it appeared to be denser in volume at the center and dissipated towards the edge. Lit directly overhead and from multiple cross sources, the viewer could approach the piece and not realize where it began and ended and also not create a shadow over the work. The material itself is a lightweight, inexpensive and abundant nylon

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<sup>15</sup> Cohen, 29.

fabric used for decorations, petticoats, and scrim. Layered on the floor, it was intended to form a body that at once seemed to levitate and sink, expand and contract and be both bound and boundless. Its ambiguous nature was meant to be both comical and ascetic in its transparent disguise and multiplicity. I felt this piece was an appropriate visual stopping point for the exhibition due to its placement on the floor, economy of space, and overall simplicity of material transformation from one thing to another.

## Conclusion

While I feel that most of the work paid attention to the specifics of installation and spatial awareness, there were aspects of the exhibition that were overworked and extraneous particularly in regards to allowing the materials to be less manipulated. The first prominent example which affected each piece in the exhibition was the titling of work. While most of the work was originally titled, I strongly feel that they were overworked and served as extra interference, precisely the problem I often encounter but seek to avoid when working in the studio. In the installation of the work, I made the decision to keep all description away from the work by having all textual information located off center in the gallery entrance. Not wanting wall labels to create a visual distraction to the work within the gallery, I came to realize I also don't want them to conceptually interfere with a viewer's interaction with individual pieces. In this sense, unless there is a perfect title for an individual piece, I think they are better left alone, perhaps titled as a group. Thus my decision to leave each piece mentioned in this document as title-less.

Another prominent example of an original decision that was not aligned with material simplicity and spatial awareness was the original placement and expanse of the entryway piece. This piece itself had gone through much iteration prior to the exhibition. While at times it consisted of forty boards, each reinstallation had to consider the space in which it was viewed. Lighting became a key concern but just as important was considering the use of multiplicity within the piece. Originally there was a short pedestal where six boards, a duplicate of each size, rested on as they were propped against the wall. The pedestal made the work too disingenuous to the context of the gallery, namely by breaking contact between the boards and the carpeting of the gallery. Similarly, the inclusion of more material than what was needed, acted more like a run-on sentence or jumbling of redundant descriptions than what made sense in the space itself.

*Conditional Clauses* was an attempt to place focus on the inconsequential to suspend a moment of perception, engage in curiosity and allow for a magnification of meaning and observation in a series of ordinary events. I emphasized materials and visual phenomenon that I felt were analogous to concepts in poetry that give prose more meaning than just the literal. By exploring and playing with balance, connection, disconnection and the viewer's relationship to the immaterial, it was my hope that the viewer would start to see these ordinary things, settings, and dependencies in new ways. Like the curious rules

of grammar to make if/then clauses, it was my hope that these visual parts and processes would form curious, seemingly non-sensical realities that without any real magic, happened to conditionally exist, even if only in a certain place or for a short moment.

## Illustrations

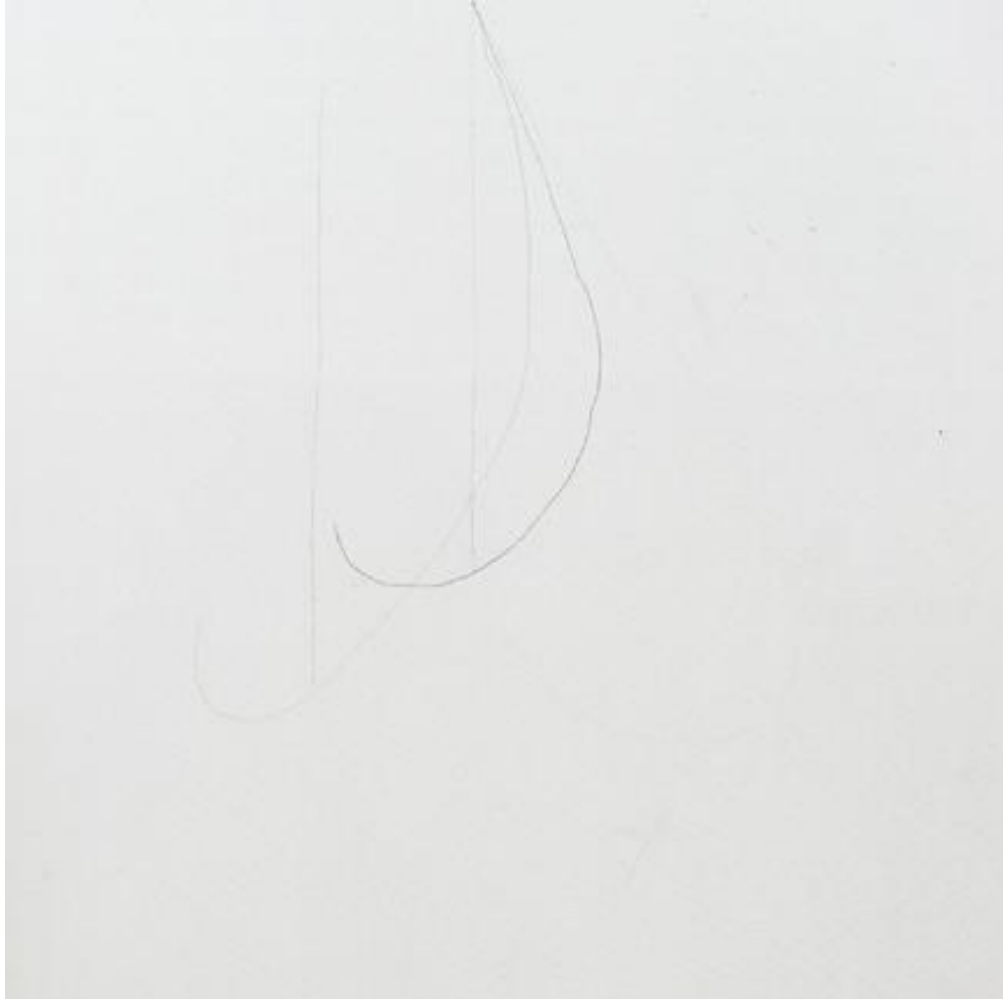


Figure 1. Martin Johnson Heade, *Approaching Thunderstorm*, 1859. Oil on canvas, 28 x 44 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 2. Richard Tuttle, *Beethoven's Stop on the Way to Egypt*, 1986. Norton Museum of Art.





**Figure 3. Richard Tuttle, *48<sup>th</sup> Wire Piece*, 1972. Wire, dimensions variable.**



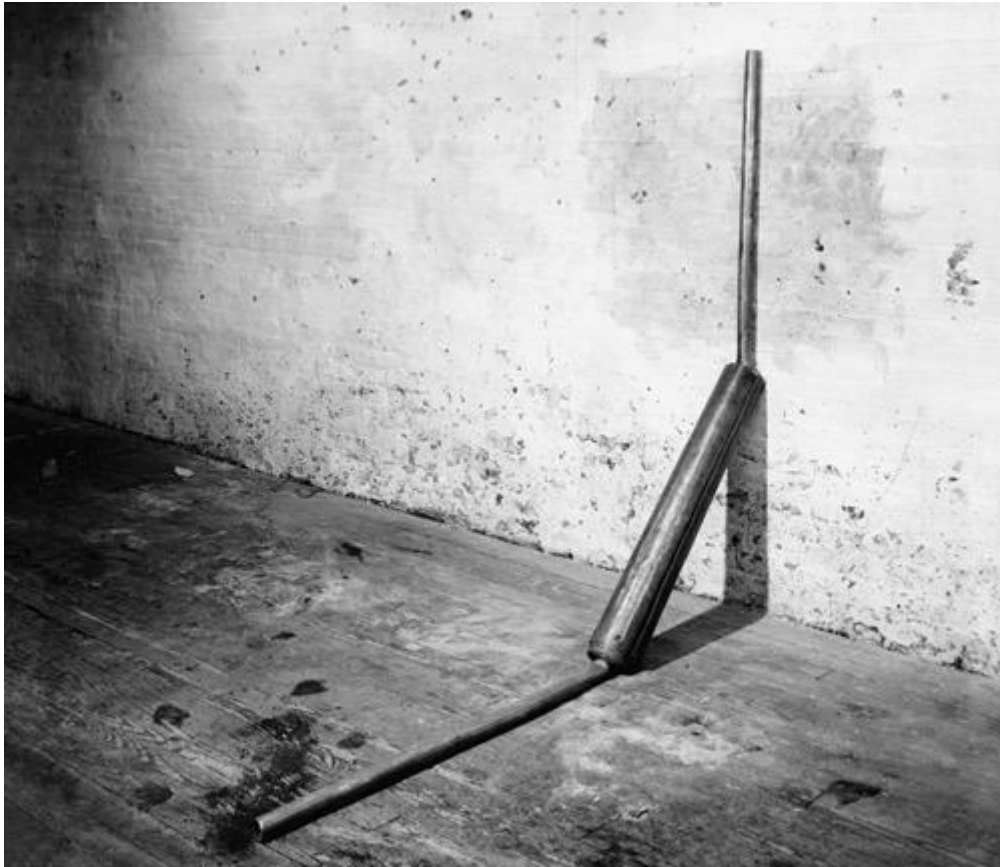
Figure 4. Richard Tuttle, *Old Men and Their Garden*, 1982.



**Figure 5. Richard Tuttle, *Rest*, 1970.**



**Figure 6. Richard Tuttle, 3<sup>rd</sup> *Rope Piece*, 1974.**



**Figure7. Richard Serra, *Bent Pipe Roll* (1968)**



**Figure 8.** Gedi Sibony, *It Can Happen Because of Everything Else*, 2007.



**Figure 9.** Gedy Sibony, *I Stay Joined*, 1991/2007.



**Figure 10. Mitzi Pederson, *Mitzi Pederson* Installation View, Hammer Museum, 2008.  
Photo Courtesy of Joshua White**





Figure 11. Mitzi Pederson, *Untitled*, 2011.



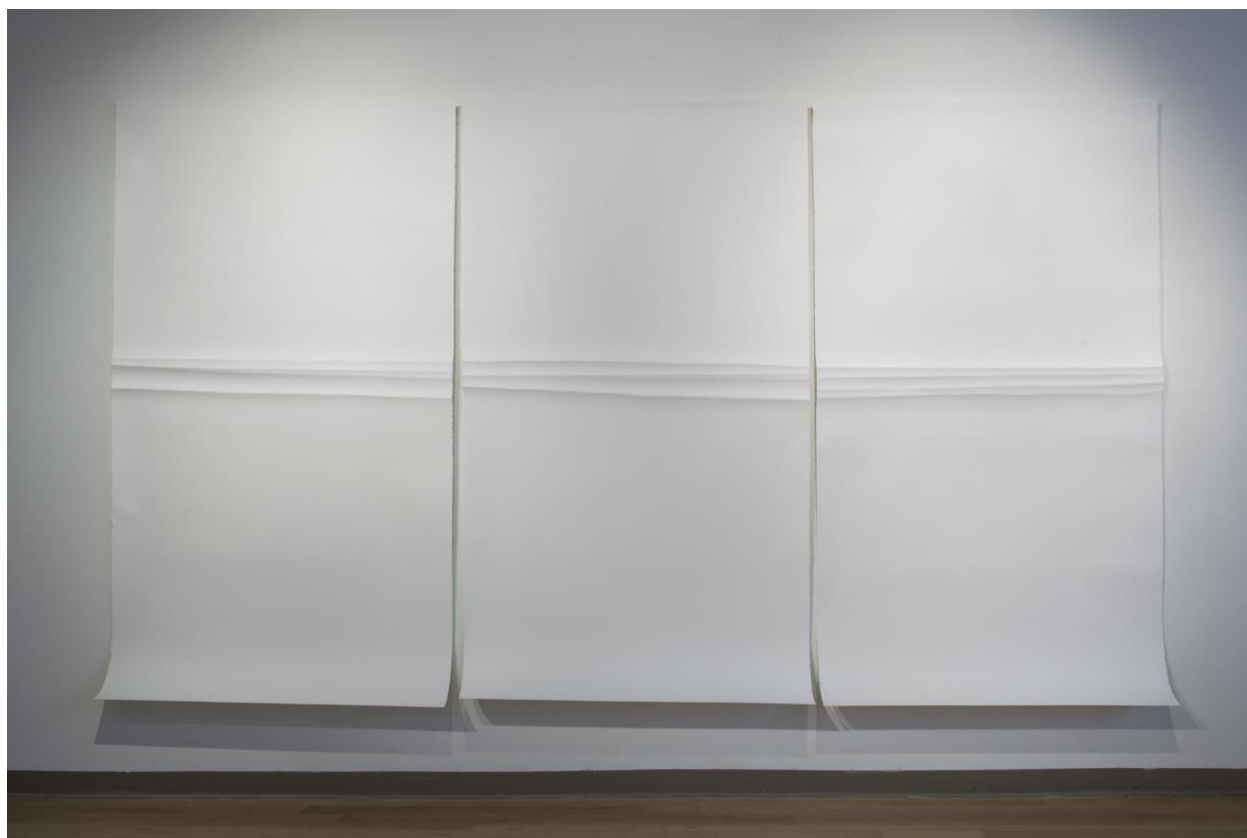
**Figure 12.** Meghan Olson, *Conditional Clauses*, 2014.



**Figure 13.** Meghan Olson, *Conditional Clauses* detail, 2014.



Figure 14. Meghan Olson, *Conditional Clauses*, 2014.



**Figure 15. Meghan Olson, *Conditional Clauses*, 2014.**





**Figure 16.** Meghan Olson, *Conditional Clauses*, 2014.



**Figure 17.** Meghan Olson, *Conditional Clauses*, 2014.

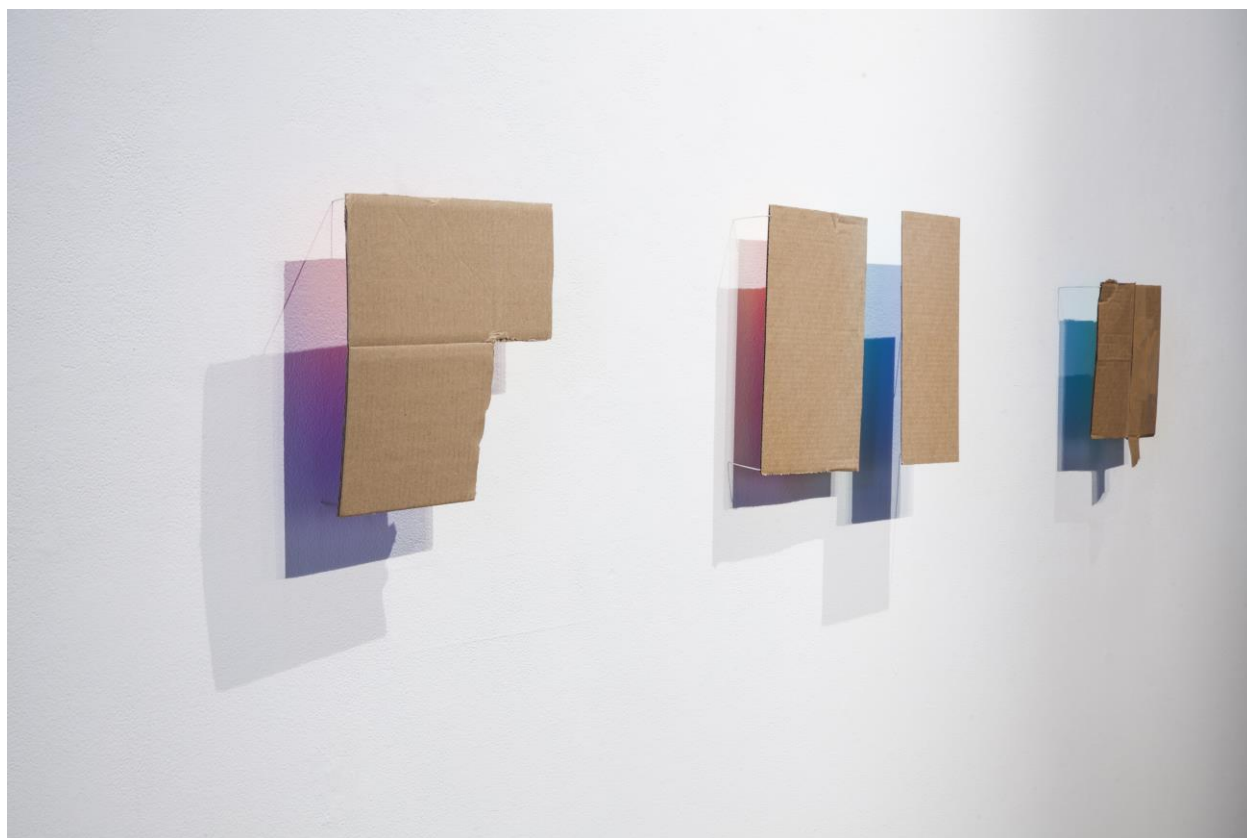


**Figure 18. Giovanni Anselmo, For an Incision in an Indefinite Number of Thousands of Years, iron, grease, wall inscription. 1969.**





**Figure 19.** Guillaume Leblon, *The Unknown Group*, 2011.



**Figure 20.** Meghan Olson, *Conditional Clauses*, 2014.



**Figure 21. Meghan Olson, *Conditional Clauses*, 2014.**

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## MEGHAN OLSON

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### Solo Exhibitions

- 2014 *Conditional Clauses*, Laura Mesaros Gallery, Morgantown, West Virginia  
*A Mind of Winter*, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
 2013 *Platonic Folds and How to Make Sense of a Canyon*, Box Heart Gallery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

### Group Exhibitions

- 2014 *Drawing/Paper*, Mine Factory, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
*Confluence*, Artist Image Resource, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
 2013 *Alloy Pittsburgh*, with Kara Skylling, Carrie Furnaces National Historic Site, Rankin, Pennsylvania  
*Prelude*, Unsmoke Systems, Braddock, and Kipp Gallery, Indiana University, Indiana, Pennsylvania  
*Interlude*, Laura Mesaros Gallery, Morgantown, West Virginia  
*30:2*, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
*Confluence*, Artists Image Resource, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
*One That Got Away*, Space 101, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
 2012 Westmoreland Museum of American Art Biennial, Westmoreland, Pennsylvania  
 Associated Artists of Pittsburgh Invitational, Pittsburgh International Airport, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
 2011 *Rust Melt*, Fe Gallery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
*Extraction*, Space Gallery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
*Distillery 5*, Brew House Gallery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
*Three Rivers Juried*, curated by Murray Horne and Linda Benedict-Jones, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

### Education

- 2014 MFA, West Virginia University  
 2002 BS, Portland State University

### Publications and Reviews

- 2014 New American Paintings #110 North East edition, Noteworthy Artist, essay by Al Miner, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
 New American Paintings #111 MFA edition  
*Alloy Pittsburgh* (catalogue forthcoming) with essay by Eric Shiner  
 2013 *Chiharu Shiota: Mattress Factory Review* by Meghan Olson, Arthopper, October 2013  
 2011 Shaw, Kurt. "Rust Melt: Abstractions at Fe Gallery". Pittsburgh Tribune Review, August 31, 2011  
 2006 *Guilds Lake Industrial Area: A Photographic History*, Oregon Historical Society Quarterly, vol. 107 (no. 1), Spring 2006

### **Grants, Awards, Curatorial Experience**

- 2014 Sprout Seed Award for the development of a digitally published regional arts review and criticism platform.
- 2014 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, West Virginia University
- 2013 Graduate Research Assistantship, West Virginia University
- 2011 Emerging Artist, Three Rivers Arts Festival, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- 2011 *Distillate*, co-curated with Kara Skylling, Future Tenant, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

### **Teaching, Museum and Arts Writing Experience**

- 2014 Director, Pittsburgh Articulate, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2013-2014 Instructor of Record, Figure Drawing, West Virginia University
- 2011-2013 Brew House Residency Co-Director and Artist Mentor
- 2010-present Carnegie Museum of Art, Curatorial Assistant and Education Specialist
- 2010-present Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Visiting Artist
- 2008-2009 Museum of Contemporary Craft Education Specialist, Portland, Oregon
- 2004-2009 Exhibition Research and Exhibit Writing, Ellipse Studios, Portland, Oregon
- 2002-2004 Exhibition and Education Coordinator, Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, Portland, Oregon

### **Residencies**

- 2013 Alloy Pittsburgh, Site Specific Sculpture and Research Residency
- 2010 Distillery 5, Brew House Association Artist in Residency program

### **Collections**

PNC Bank Corporate Artwork Collection

A&E *Those Who Kill* Set Collection